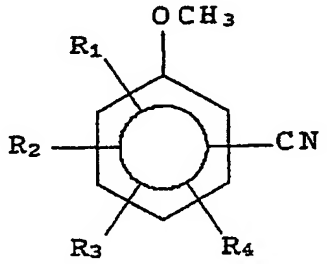
What is claimed is:

1. A process for the catalyst-free preparation of cyanophenols from methoxybenzonitriles, characterized in that a substituted methoxybenzonitrile of the general formula (I)



where

R1, R2, R3 and R4 are each independently hydrogen, a C1-10-alkyl, C2-8-alkoxy, aryl, a phenoxy or a further nitrile group

is reacted with an alkali metal alkoxide at temperatures between 80 and 230°C.

2. The process as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the methoxybenzonitrile component used comprises di-, tri- tetra- or pentamethoxybenzonitriles.

3. The process as claimed in either of claims 1 and 2, characterized in that the alkali metal alkoxide used is a methoxide, more preferably sodium methoxide.

4. The process as claimed in one of claims 1 to 3, characterized in that it is carried out at temperatures between 120 and 200°C and more preferably between 140 and 180°C.

5. The process as claimed in one of claims 1 to 4, characterized in that the molar ratio of the methoxybenzonitrile component to the alkali metal alkoxide component is 1:0.5 to 1.5 and more preferably 1:1.0 to 1.1.

6. The process as claimed in one of claims 1 to 5, characterized in that it is carried out in the presence of a polar and/or nonpolar solvent, more preferably in the presence of a C1-6-alcohol, e.g. methanol, and/or of a solvent from the group of tetrahydrofuran, benzene, toluene, xylene and methyl tert-butyl ether.

7. The process as claimed in one of claims 1 to 6, characterized in that the alkoxide component is initially charged in an alcohol, then the methoxybenzonitrile component is added and preferably heated with stirring, which is more preferably effected in an autoclave.

8. The process as claimed in one of claims 1 to 7, characterized in that the methoxybenzonitrile component has been prepared by ammoxidizing a methoxytoluene and in the presence of ammonia and (atmospheric) oxygen.

9. The process as claimed in claim 8, characterized in that the methoxybenzonitrile component is reacted further after the ammoxidation directly without isolation.